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ABSTRACT

The role of block building in children's learning was studied by a student teacher who observed a teacher's block building curriculum in a combined first and second grade class. The purpose was to clarify the linkage between thinking and doing, spoken intention and actual consequences, and planning and spontaneity in the curriculum. The cycle of observation, reflection, and provisioning was a feature of the teacher's learning process and a significant feature of her curriculum. ("Provisioning" is described as "implementing curriculum the teacher feels best addresses and extends the interests and learning of the children.") The teacher observed students' interests; confirmed them upon reflection; and related them to her curriculum development by provisioning the classroom with materials that matched the children's interest. Dominant motifs in this cycle were personal meaning, integration, and continuity. Each of these resulted from the teacher's background and beliefs. The physical context of the block corner and block building became a focus of the approach to curriculum development. Block building was shown to be a rich medium for learning and social negotiation. A list of types of learning that block building enables (for example, math concepts, science, symbolization, problem solving, and art) is appended. Contains 15 references. (LB)

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by

Lydia Werbizky

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Block Building: Its Role in Children's Learning as Seen by One Elementary School Teacher

By Lydia Werbizky
Van Etten Elementary School
Van Etten, NY

Introduction

"To understand more about effective teachers, it is imperative to know more about their thinking—their ideas, values, and beliefs, how consistently they are put into practice, and the meaning this has for the children" (Yonemura, 1986, p. 4).

During my student teaching semester, I studied the classroom in which I practiced. Focusing on an individual teacher's blockbuilding curriculum, I interviewed Ann Halpern and recorded observations of her combined grade 1-2 classroom. Following Margaret Yonemura's example, my study was guided by a desire to understand the motivating forces behind Ann's curricular decisions. My attempt was to clarify the crucial linkage between thinking and doing, between spoken intention and actual consequences, and between planning and spontaneity. As a student teacher, I worked with such dichotomies in my own teaching and consequently focused on them when studying Ann's teaching style. These are my reflections on my work with Ann: how I came to understand the underlying values and intentions of one teacher, how her values were enacted, and how children in her classroom renegotiated Ann's values.

A critical factor in my investigation was my awareness of the context-bound nature of meaning. Through my work with Ann, I realized that speakers invest commonplace words with individual meanings. As Ann spoke words like "support," "share," and "respect," she gave each word particular philosophical and theoretical shadings specific to her own beliefs, experiences, and education.

For example, the word "respect" when spoken by Ann means a sensitivity to children's interests, abilities, and needs. Curricular implications point to a child-centered, developmentally appropriate classroom in which blockbuilding is given legitimacy as a learning activity.

On the other hand, respect was a word used frequently in my training as a Suzuki violin teacher. In that context, "respect" meant children's obedience to teachers and parents. One of the curricular consequences of this concept of "respect" was for some teachers to require that the physical act of bowing precede each lesson. Another was the adoption of a sing-song call and response to begin each lesson.

Teacher: Why are you here?
Student: I want to learn, Miss Waite.

(This same student was later overheard, alone in a laundry room after his lesson, rhythmically chanting, "We don't want to learn, Miss Waite. We don't want to learn. We want to punch you in the nose, Miss Waite.") Suzuki lessons were teacher directed, and practice at home was parent directed. The contrast between Ann's meaning of "respect" with the meaning "respect" had in my Suzuki teacher training illustrates the need to account for the context and the speaker if meaning is to be accurately conveyed and understood. Throughout my research, I

felt the need to listen not only to the words that Ann spoke, but also to discover her personal contextual meanings.

The Observation/Reflection/ Provisioning Cycle

In addition to focusing on words and their particular contextual meanings, I also focused on how Ann comes to know, and how that knowledge enables her to shape the context for teaching and learning that her students then reshape. In talking about her work with and away from the children, Ann described a cycle of processes in which she engages as she plans, develops curriculum, and teaches. These processes reflect how Ann comes to know. The following anecdote illustrates this cycle.

> Anecdote setting: West Hill School, the water table, Ann's classroom.
>
> Ann recalls:
>
> "Children were really interested in transferring water from one place to another so I kept provisioning the water table with different things that would aid that transfer."
>
> "I kept observing how they were doing that."

Ann talks about sitting and watching "and then you have to take it the next step to reflect on what you've written or what you've seen. Otherwise it's then just very haphazard about what you're going to put out next."

The cycle of processes which Ann describes in the preceding anecdote is one of observation, reflection, and provisioning. My awareness of this cycle began with Ann's choice of words. I looked for consistency of language as well as refrains. The three words, "observation," "reflection," and "provisioning" constantly reappeared, sometimes in combinations, but often separately, in a variety of contexts. Children's interests are revealed to Ann through observation, confirmed upon reflection, and, upon confirmation, become a bridge to her curriculum development.

Provisioning/Observation/Reflection

The observation/reflection/provisioning cycle is a feature of Ann's learning process as well as a significant feature of her curriculum development and performance. Because Ann values observation and reflection, these phases of curriculum development cast her in the role of a learner; in this case a learner of children's interests. The dimension of reflection becomes a transformative phase, during which Ann as the learner moves towards acting as the teacher, formulating curriculum plans. In the provisioning phase Ann acts as a teacher, implementing curriculum she feels best addresses and extends the interests and learnings of the children. During this phase, Ann is already beginning the observation process once more, observing the consequences of her provisioning and so reactivating the cycle. Learning and teaching become complementary processes and Ann acts as both a learner and a teacher in her professional role. In doing so, the children in her class also engage in a duality of roles. They become Ann's teachers during her observations, and learners as Ann provides for them. At the same time, they are observed by Ann once more and therefore act as teachers, and so the cycle continues.

Dominant Motifs: Personal Meaning, Integrating, and Continuity

Ann's process of studying and provisioning for her classroom is informed by an additional trio of consistencies. Upon emergence and reexamination, their relationships to one another became clear, as did the congruence between Ann's words and the anecdotes and events that she related. In stating consistencies as dominant unifying motifs that run through the text of all three interviews, I do not intend for Ann's teaching style to appear to be a puzzle that consists of neat, discrete

pieces. Nor, in presenting the previous cycle, do I mean to imply that Ann steps in and out of roles and is not herself (Yonemura, 1986, p. 118). Rather, the motifs express the dynamics which give Ann's teaching direction.

Personal Meaning

Ann's professional life has been characterized by her continuing search for personal meaning as a learner and by striving, as a teacher, to provision for personally meaningful learning by the children with whom she works. (A brief biographical sketch of Ann Halpern is included in the addendum.) For Ann, personal meaning in learning is closely associated with people. When discussing her own education, she commented repeatedly on her love of learning (a theme within Personal Meaning) and schooling.

> "I loved elementary school and I would cry at vacations and I would beg for homework" (laughs) (tape 1).
>
> about Antioch, "I loved the place and the philosophy" (tape 2).
>
> about Bank Street, "I loved it" (tape 1).

When I asked her to explain why she felt that way, Ann invariably mentioned both the learning and the people with whom she interacted. Ann said of her teachers in first through fourth grades:

> "I thought they were wonderful people. . . . I have images of holding my teacher's hand out on the playground" (tape 1).
>
> "I had relationships with my teachers" (tape 1).
>
> "human interactions with teachers" (tape 1).
>
> At an Antioch work placement, "became friends with both of the teachers in the placement" (tape 1).

Additional examples of the connection between people and Ann's learning are her frequent mention of significant people who influenced her professional development. She speaks of supervising teachers in her placements, particularly Happie Byers from Bank Street. She also speaks of Pat Carini's research, of Ann Caren (another Ithaca elementary school teacher), and many other "supportive" colleagues throughout her career. Ann's relationship with the children she teaches is another example of the connection between learning and people. She sees herself and the children as being engaged in a mutual teaching and learning relationship, as exemplifies by the observation/reflection/provisioning cycle.

The connection between people and learning is also exhibited in Ann's concern with fostering "home/school communication," an issue which she studied in-depth during her sabbatical year. Her intention is to teach to the "children's interests," and to connect a meaningful part of the children's lives and home to their schooling. Thus, in facilitating home/school communication, the integration and connectedness to people Ann values for her own learning becomes valued and facilitated for her students through her curriculum.

With the children and with her colleagues Ann speaks of mutual "sharing," "support," and "respect." She speaks also of "making an impact on the children's lives" (tape 1), mirroring the way she speaks of influential people, like Pat Carini, as having an impact on her own way of "looking at children." In contrast, tensions in her work often are characterized as a result of "socially isolating" working conditions.

Another aspect of Personal Meaning for Ann is her reliance on direct experience for her

learning. Studies at Antioch and Bank Street both combined school and work/placement experiences. Ann saw that both types of learning were "valued" and "respected." In turn, she values, respects, and facilitates direct experience or "hands-on" learning in her classroom.

Integration

Ann mentioned integration, both the word and the concept, frequently during our conversations. Integration of curriculum areas, of parts of the room and of information, were all discussed. Ann's relationship to theory involves both Integration and Personal Meaning. She spoke of her work at Ypsilanti involving Piaget's theories and then of working at "fitting Bank Street and Piaget more comfortably together" (tape 1).

Ann also sees theory as providing "a framework to act in." She explained that she draws from theory to help her to make and judge decisions, to know "what's appropriate developmentally," and to develop curriculum. Theory aids her in avoiding "haphazard" curriculum decisions, just as observing and reflecting on the children's interests do (tape 3).

Ann uses phrases like looking at the "whole child." She speaks holistically about learning, integrating aesthetic, social, cognitive, and affective domains. Just as learning and teaching are two sides of the same coin and so integrated, her concept of herself and the children is of integrated, whole people.

Continuity

Ann's concept of time and of the progression of events in her life speaks of her sense continuity. She uses the word "always" often, stating, for example, "I always knew I wanted to work with kids" (tape 1).

Regarding her career in teaching she states, "It was just almost a linear line to my career, and I kept at it" (tape 1).

"It was just a very smooth . . . kind of progression that I went through (tape 1).

Ann's sense of continuity is closely linked to her sense of integration. Her study of home/school communication, her ongoing observation/reflection/provisioning cycle, her sense that Pat Carini's work was "adding to me," and that "there's no part of the room that can't be connected to the block corner" all express her interest in connections, integration, and, maintaining a sense of continuity in her work (tapes 2 and 3).

The themes—connection to people, respect, support, hands-on learning, love of learning—that appear throughout the interviews with Ann express values, theories, and goals that she has developed and then acted upon in her professional life. These themes can be seen as being partial expression of the dominant motifs in her life: Personal Meaning. Integration, and Continuity. These motifs, when aligned in this order and considered as a process or cycle, can then be seen as another, broader, expression of the Observation/Reflection/Provisioning cycle so useful to Ann's work.

For example, observation centered on personal interest for children can become Ann's personally meaningful experiences. Reflection can also become integration; both play a transformative role in a cycle. Provisioning is an active manifestation of continuity as well as an extension. Both direct the participant back to the beginning of the cycle, providing a kind of continuity of process, a spiral. Like a spiral, Ann's learning and teaching are facilitated through these transformative cycles, returning her at once to reconsider the same place, but on higher ground, at a higher level of

self-awareness and professional development.

Blockbuilding: Ann's Perspective

At the time of the interviews Ann described her ongoing profession development, stating that one of her "major interests now" is "responding to children's interests as a place, a starting place for developing curriculum . . ." This notion of place, Ann's metaphor for her focus and starting point for curriculum development, becomes concretely expressed when considered in the physical context of the block corner.

Blockbuilding is a curriculum area in which all of Ann's previously mentioned roots, values, theories, and cycles come into play. (A list of learning which blockbuilding enables, generated from the taped conversations with Ann, is included in the addendum.) She states that her time spent in the block corner is as a "keen kid-watcher in order to continue to be a learner. Because otherwise you can just look at the curriculum cookbook and say 'this is how I'm going to do it'" (tape 3). She sees herself and the children as active curriculum developers, rather that relying on outside "curriculum cookbooks." In the block corner this means being a keen observer. Outside of the block corner Ann fosters interest in blockbuilding through her discussions. She observes and reflects on the outcomes of these discussions, making plans to further provision for meaningful learning.

Ann's knowledge and values intertwine and inform one another in the learning enabled by blockbuilding. For example, during the activity of blockbuilding, Deweyan social-emotional concerns intertwine with Piagetian theory (e.g., conservation of number). Ann's concern for and connection to people is expressed through fostering self-esteem through blockbuilding and then intertwines with concerns about the development of language use, math and science concepts, and aesthetic sensibilities, to name just a few learnings.

The choice of blocks is in itself a statement of values transposed with theory. Of blocks, Ann stated "they were as necessary as water at Bank Street Street" (tape 3) and spoke of their role in a social studies based curriculum. From a Piagetian perspective, Ann sees blocks as being developmentally appropriate materials.

Because Ann's theoretical base is so closely intertwined with her values, her feelings about blocks in the classroom also include the motifs: personal meaning, integration, and continuity. The blocks are a vehicle through which children can express and "represent their world" (tape 3). Integration also implies continuity of learning, from one medium to the others in the room.

Ann's teaching stance has many implications for blockbuilding in the room. Because she sees blockbuilding as a rich medium for learning, she allows for both time (morning: self chosen activity time) and space for the children's activity. She also provides a large and varied array of block shapes and sizes, introducing new ones throughout the year.

Within the block corner Ann demonstrates a "respect" for the materials. She does so through their arrangement on shelves according to size as well as through two rules. The first is "no more than four blocks may be carried at a time." The second is a rule against knocking buildings down. Ann models blockbuilding protocol as well, from initial building to cleanup. These rules become curriculum decisions that help make cleanup part of the building process and help foster respect for materials and for one another's work as part of blockbuilding.

Facilitating building is linked to the observation/reflection/provisioning cycle. Ann observes children working in the block corner and often asks questions and comments on what she sees. After observation and reflection Ann may choose to point out symmetry, direct a child toward the gluing corner to make a prop, or to simply encourage a tentative builder. She may also choose to bring in props that address the children's interest, or suggest that the children may wish to do so themselves. Props brought from home foster a connection between home and school as well. Thus, provisioning for one identified need, a child's interest in building for a specific prop, may also become a vehicle for fulfilling Ann's other curricular goals.

When Ann feels that provisioning for the class is necessary, she includes blockbuilding in her class discussion. These discussions may take the form of introducing and discussing a shape, "what could this be?"; of appreciating and commenting on a classmate's structure as a whole class; of introducing new props (e.g., farm animals); or of involving the whole class in building a "design building" together, one block at a time.

The Block Corner: The Children's Perspective

Field notes of block corner observations revealed learnings from the children's perspective. Children's activities and learning were consistent with Ann's intentions for the block corner and spoke to the function the block corner serves as a "place" for children to pursue their interests. The following anecdotes reflect the richness of everyday block corner talk.

> Kelly builds an ornate, symmetrical building. When I comment that it is symmetrical, she says "yes, and it's 'fourical' too." She shows me that four sides are the same. (photograph, anecdotal record, 3/30)

Experimentation with language, concepts of number, aesthetic awareness, are all embedded in Kelly's comment.

Another anecdote reveals children taking on Ann's language, and so some of her values as they've perceived them, while solving a structural problem.

> Clarissa: I don't want to build it back up cause we'll never get it done.
>
> Ben: Yes we will if we cooperate. We could build it back in two minutes. (3/6)

The block corner is frequently a site of intense social negotiations, as children plan, design, and construct according to personal interests and engage in the resultant conflicts over materials and space.

Clarissa is building a zoo for her stuffed animals, including a large toy whale she has brought from home.

> Ben: Can I build with you?
>
> Clarissa: No. (says there isn't enough room)
>
> Ben: Look at all this room.
>
> Clarissa: Look, do you think whales need an eensy beensy bit of room? (keeps talking about how much room she needs)
>
> Ben: It's not alive. They're toys!
>
> Clarissa: Well, they are to me.
>
> Ben walks away, calmly shrugging, upon hearing Clarissa's explanation of her need for room.

This last anecdote also speaks to an unintended category that emerged as field notes were recorded and analyzed. In addition to being a place in which Ann observed and provisioned for learning, and a place where children pursued their interests, the block corner served as a "free zone" (Britzman, 1987), a place where children engaged in social interaction without adult intervention. This interaction took the form of silliness, daring talk and gestures, dramatic play involving media characters. and of moving from other parts of the room to the block corner to stop, chat, and watch builders. Some examples:

Jim picks up wooden cylinders. "I pooped in it."

Craig laughs, "Poop flavored ice cream."

Jim picks up a cylinder and cone. Makes fart noises and puts the cone on his backside, etc. (2/13)

Jim barrels back into the block corner and knocks into a structure. Craig says, "You destroyed the Slime Pit," referring to a popular cartoon and toy. (2/13)

Dubeck is carrying a graph from person to person, asking what their favorite part of the room is. Asks builders for signatures and opinions. Stops and watches the activity of the builders, who work on marble chutes. (2/6)

The value of a classroom "free zone" is that it provides "time out" (Werbizky, 1986) from adult scrutiny and adult classroom norms. Even within a benign, supportive environment children appear to need their own space. This free zone also represents Ann's concrete expression of her belief in children's trustworthiness, need for autonomy, and self-directness. The block corner provides a place where children can be free to interact and negotiate within their own social norms, as well as negotiate expected classroom norms. Interaction is fluid, children flex their social muscles freely, create and deepen friendships, and define and redefine roles for themselves.

The following anecdote illustrates and summarizes the diverse social and educational functions served by blockbuilding in Ann's classroom.

2/6 block corner.

10:32
Kelly approaches. Kelly and Gabriel build marble chutes.

Gabriel: Kelly, can Charlie play? (social negotiation)

Charlie: We need bridges. (planning)

Kelly: Oh, it's getting ruined up here. (aesthetics)

Gabriel: Let's see if it's going to work. (hypothesis formation)

Kelly: It's good. (encouragement)

The children work on the chute, linking cardboard tubes together. (cooperation)

Gabriel: We have to see if it's going to work first. (planning, problem solving)

Children try rolling a marble through the chute.

10:35
Kelly: Oh it doesn't work. We need signs here. (problem solving, language arts)

10:36
Jean: Can I help? Can I help? I've got some good ideas. (social negotiation)

Charlie collects marbles.

Kelly: Here's all the marbles. (sharing, cooperation)

Jean returns.

Jean: Oh, that's the problem, right there. (problem solving)

Kelly: No, it works, we'll show you. (cooperation, problem solving)

Kelly rolls a marble down the chute.

10:39
Kelly, Charlie, Jean, and Gabriel work on a marble runway. Charlie begins building a section with blue wooden cubes.

Charlie: I need to try something. (hypothesis formation, planning)

Charlie rolls marble down. "It works!" (self-esteem, problem solving)

Pam crouches down, watches. Gabriel approaches with marbles. He rolls them down, one after the other.

Kelly, to Jean: Hey, tomorrow you can make another one. (planning, problem solving)

They discuss a problem—tomorrow is Saturday. Kelly begins to list the names of those who built the chute. (language arts, see sign 2/6)

Jean: I helped. I made all of this. (self-esteem)

end of anecdote

Concluding Remarks

This qualitative study raised many issues, provoking further study and thought on my part. I feel that more needs to be learned, for example, about social negotiation and norms within the classroom. That the block corner serves so many social functions, particularly that of a "free zone," bears further exploration to clarify the children's need for a sense of community separate from the teacher. My strong hunch is that this separate sense of community is a critical factor in the relationship between children and their teachers, especially in matters involving autonomy, authority, and the distribution of power in the classroom.

However, in returning to my primary focus for this study, the ways in which beliefs, roots, and theory intertwine and propel one teacher's action, I feel satisfied that some of the mysterious nature of teaching is clearer to me. Like a fine improvisational artist, Ann responds to the members of the classroom with spontaneity, all the time relying on a wealth of knowledge and experience as her supportive base. The consistency and continuity between her visible teaching practice and her inner knowledge speaks to the highly developed quality of her work. Just as the skills of the improvisational jazz musician are wrongly attributed to the accidental gift of a racially-determined musical intuition, the skills of the teacher are often "relegated to the frequently gender-linked realm of the intuitive" (Yonemura, 1986, p. 4). This denies the conscious nature of the professional teacher's effort and underestimates the validity of the art. For if Ann's knowledge and abilities were not the result of a deliberate process, then her artistic practice would not be of such consistently high quality. The renowned trumpet player, Wynton Marsalis, uses similar language to refute the same kind of myth on behalf of jazz musicians with his comments about "critics who still think that Louis Armstrong was an 'Intuitive Genius' .... What does that mean, 'Intuitive Genius'?

I guess that means he didn't know what he was doing. If he didn't know what he was doing, he couldn't have been as consistent as he was. Consistency, that means you know what you're doing."

The work of such qualitative researchers and scholars as Yonemura, Elbaz, Lampert, et al., dispels some of the prejudices and myths which obstruct the investigation and understanding of quality teaching. My hope is that this qualitative study will assist others in understanding that teaching is a highly developed art (Eisner, 1985) and that one way to learn about that art is to listen to and observe its accomplished practitioners. To paraphrase Wynton Marsalis, they know what they're doing.

Addendum

Biographical Sketch of Ann Halpern

Ann stated, "I always knew I wanted to work with kids" (tape 1). To that end, Ann studied at Antioch, majoring in sociology and also working with children as part of Antioch's "hands-on" teaching philosophy. From Antioch, Ann went to Bank Street and earned a graduate degree in early childhood education. After Bank Street, she worked as a teacher in a federally funded project, headed by Constance Kamii, designed to explore classroom applications of Piaget's theories. Located at Ypsilanti, Michigan, the program ran for three years.

After leaving Ypsilanti, Ann came to Ithaca. Her teaching career in Ithaca has included several years teaching nursery school and kindergarten, and two years lecturing for Cornell's Human Development and Family Studies Department. After teaching adults for two years, Ann chose to leave Cornell and return to the elementary classroom.

Currently, Ann is teaching second grade, sharing the classroom with another dedicated teacher, Nancy Marino. Ann also presents workshops in facilitating home/school communication, whole language, implications of Piaget's theories for the classroom, and blockbuilding.

List of Learnings That Blockbuilding Enables

1. math concepts
   - number
   - space
   - size
   - shape
   - one to one correspondence
   - part/whole relationships
   - fraction
   - measurement
   - estimation
   - conservation of number

2. physical knowledge
   - what are the attributes of wood?
   - what can you do with it?
   - what can't you do with it?

3. science
   - experimentation
   - balance
   - gravity
   - ramps
   - pulleys
   - prediction
   - hypothesis formation
   - estimation

4. symbolization/representation
   - having something stand for something else

5. social interaction and collaboration
   - learning from each other
   - exchanging ideas
   - seeing something from someone else's point of view

6. dramatic play

7. problem solving

8. art
   - design
   - architectural forms

9. emotional
   - self esteem
   - "I can make something"

10. language arts
    - putting words to concepts have been done with blocks, like"connect" or "balance" (vocabulary development)
    - writing for or about buildings

(This list was generated from Ann's words, tape 3)

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Lydia Werbizky is a kindergarten teacher at Van Etten Elementary School, Van Etten, New York. Also a professional musician, she is active in regional arts-in-education courses, projects, and workshops. This article was originally presented at the Ethnography in Education Research Forum, University of Pennsylvania, 1989.

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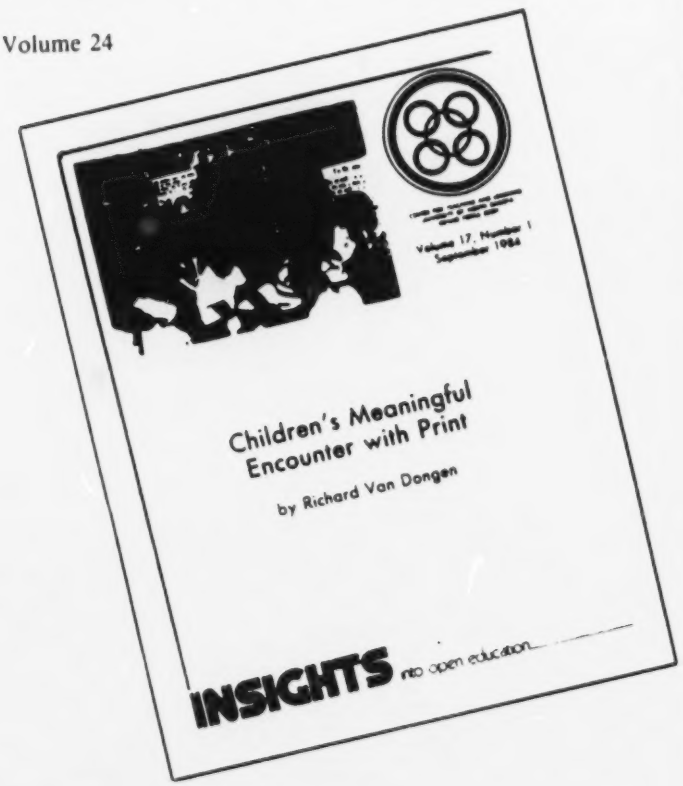

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